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AUTHOR	Norton, John
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ABSTRACT

A recent evaluation has concluded that the Doctoral Scholar's Program of the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) has more than lived up to its promise in encouraging minority students to enroll in graduate school and in supporting them with "more than a check and a handshake." In its 7-year history, the Doctoral Scholars Program has served more than 350 minority doctoral scholars, including more than 120 in mathematics and science-related fields. By winter 2000, almost 100 scholars had earned their Ph.D.s and 70% of them were employed on college campuses as junior faculty, postdoctoral students, or campus administrators. The high retention rate, more than 90%, for the SREB is much higher than the retention rate in similar national programs of 37%. The program's support strategies, which include regular contact, information sharing, and a mentoring component, were credited with its success. The program's annual institute promotes the development of support networks, and the program's support systems encourage those of the institutions themselves. Suggestions for program improvement include the call for continued support, the expansion of the annual Institute for Teaching and Mentoring, the improvement of information dissemination, and an intensified focus on the transition to faculty positions. (SLD)

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More Than a Check and a Handshake:

The Progress and Promise of the SREB-State Doctoral Scholars Program

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(404) 875-9211
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This report is adapted from *Progress and Promise: An Evaluation of Faculty Diversity* and was prepared by education reporter John Norton in consultation with Ansley Abraham, director of the SREB Doctoral Scholars Program. The evaluation of the compact was conducted by Daryl G. Smith and Sharon Parker, with support from the Ford Foundation.

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Questions about the report or the SREB Doctoral Scholars Program may be directed to Ansley Abraham at (404) 875-9211 or doctoral.scholars@sreb.org. Information also may be obtained from the Web site at www.sreb.org.

THE SREB DOCTORAL SCHOLARS PROGRAM ...

... lives up to its promise of being "more than a check and a handshake."

... reduces feelings of isolation and creates a support network.

... makes doctoral degrees more affordable and allows scholars to complete their degrees more quickly.

... annual Institute strengthens scholar skills, knowledge and satisfaction.

... builds the capacity of the university and its faculty to attract and retain promising minority scholars.

... adds status and credibility to the scholars.

... expands the diversity of college faculty.

... helps emerging college faculty develop the teaching skills expected in today's university classrooms.

... helps students develop scholarly habits to meet the challenges of graduate study and college teaching.

... provides support for "all-but-dissertation" scholars to complete their degrees.

More Than a Check and a Handshake:

The Progress and Promise of the SREB-State Doctoral Scholars Program

In the early 1990s, the shortage of minority higher-education faculty in the SREB states was like the cliché about the weather: Everybody talked about it, but no one seemed able to do much about it.

The demand for minority faculty greatly outstripped the supply, and colleges and universities often found themselves "stealing" faculty from one another, redistributing a small number of minority Ph.D.s that grew far too slowly to meet the needs of the South's colleges and universities.

In a 19-state study, which looked at a single year in the 1990s, the Southern Education Foundation found that only about 250 doctoral degrees were awarded to African-Americans in noneducation fields, and fewer than 5 percent earned doctorates in mathematics, engineering, physical sciences or computer science. Typically, a state produced no more than a single African-American Ph.D. in math or science.

THE EVALUATORS DETERMINED THAT THE SREB DOCTORAL SCHOLARS PROGRAM'S DESIGN "IS PRECISELY WHAT IS REQUIRED."

With a few notable exceptions, programs to attract minority students into doctoral studies and place them in faculty positions were only marginally successful. High dropout rates and a declining interest in faculty careers raised questions about the wisdom of investing in expensive initiatives to recruit minorities into doctoral study.

It was time to change the weather.

In 1993, the Southern Regional Education Board and two partner organizations — the New England Board of Higher Education and the Western Interstate Compact for Higher Education — formed the Compact for Faculty Diversity and approached several national foundations with a proposal they believed could improve on the shortcomings of past recruitment programs and produce a steady supply of minority Ph.D.s.

Florida's McKnight Doctoral Fellowship Program — a statewide initiative with a proven track record in recruiting, retaining and placing minority scholars in faculty positions — would supply the beginning blueprint.

"The McKnight Fellowship showed that a single state could 'grow the pool' of minority doctoral scholars with enough financial and hands-on support," SREB President Mark Musick said. "We wanted to show that a group of states could band together and do the same thing."

SREB's approach to develop its Doctoral Scholars Program was simple to describe, if challenging to carry out. It would be "more than a check and a handshake," Musick promised. States, in partnership with SREB, would encourage students (many of them nontraditional Ph.D. candidates) to enroll in graduate school and then would provide an unprecedented level of support to help them persist through the stages of graduate study, obtain Ph.D.s and secure faculty positions.

Every scholar would receive hands-on assistance from the host academic department, as well as intensive mentoring and encouragement from the program's staff. Scholars also would participate in professional-development opportunities, including an annual networking conference and activities to hone teaching skills.

Seven years later, a new study funded by the Ford Foundation concludes that the Doctoral Scholars Program has more than lived up to its promise.

IN ITS SEVEN-YEAR HISTORY, THE DOCTORAL SCHOLARS PROGRAM HAS SERVED MORE THAN 350 MINORITY DOCTORAL SCHOLARS, INCLUDING MORE THAN 120 IN MATH- AND SCIENCE-RELATED FIELDS.

THE SREB DOCTORAL SCHOLARS PROGRAM ...

... lives up to its promise of being "more than a check and a handshake."

"The Doctoral Scholars Program taught me many things. I learned to manage my time more wisely; prepare for candidacy and dissertation exam and defense; prepare and successfully manage a dissertation committee; choose my battles carefully; negotiate my first faculty position; be a successful partner with a mentor; and gain the tools I needed to become a successful teacher, adviser and mentor." **(Assistant professor, South Carolina)**

"For every student of color who enters graduate study, there must be at least five others who would make the same choice if they had access to the financial and personal support that states offer through the SREB program. The SREB Doctoral Scholars Program is a 'yes, you can' program and an invaluable one to scholars of color." **(Kentucky scholar)**

THE PROGRAM "HAS DONE WHAT IT SET OUT TO DO"

The SREB-State Doctoral Scholars Program "has done what it set out to do: identify students committed to faculty positions and work with institutions and students to ensure success in graduate study," researchers Daryl G. Smith and Sharon Parker wrote in their 2000 evaluation report. The researchers found that the Doctoral Scholars Program has created "a multilayered web of support." This "intensive and multitiered approach has meant that student success is more likely and that commitments to faculty roles remain high."

THE PROGRAM'S "INTENSIVE APPROACH HAS MEANT THAT STUDENT SUCCESS IS MORE LIKELY AND COMMITMENTS TO FACULTY ROLES REMAIN HIGH."

Over the Doctoral Scholars Program's seven-year life, SREB member states have placed more than 350 minority doctoral scholars in the program, including more than 120 in math- and science-related fields. By winter 2000, almost 100 scholars had earned their Ph.D.s and 70 percent of them were employed on college campuses as junior faculty, postdoctoral students or campus administrators. Another 200 scholars continue to pursue doctoral degrees, and new scholars join the program each year.

The high retention rate — more than 90 percent — for the SREB Doctoral Scholars Program "must be considered extraordinary," the evaluators concluded. In reviewing data on persistence in doctoral programs across the United States, the researchers found typical completion rates of 40 percent to 60 percent for students of ***all*** racial and

THE SREB DOCTORAL SCHOLARS PROGRAM ...

*... **reduces feelings of isolation and creates a support network.***

"SREB has been more than a source of funding for my doctoral pursuits. SREB also provides support and guidance. When issues arose that — as a first-generation doctoral student — I didn't know how to resolve, the SREB staff was there to help me gauge the situation and discuss my options." **(Virginia scholar)**

"Even if I had overcome the financial barriers, I am not sure I would have emotionally survived the first year of graduate study without the support, preparation and encouragement of SREB. While I did well academically, self-doubt and hopelessness sometimes creeped in. Because SREB had armed me, prepared me and was there to support me, I survived." **(North Carolina scholar)**

ethnic backgrounds. National data show that the retention rate among minority scholars is about 37 percent.

The evaluators also found an unusually high level of dedication to faculty careers among participants in the Doctoral Scholars Program. Preliminary data from a Pew-sponsored national study of doctoral education, they said, suggest that 35 percent of doctoral scholars experience a reduced level of interest in faculty careers. In the Doctoral Scholars Program, "levels of commitment remain high," the evaluators found.

The evaluators noted that the students served by the Doctoral Scholars Program "represent a significant cohort of doctoral scholars of color." In many college and university departments, the scholars "represent the potential for an ongoing pattern of success for students of color — something that most programs have never experienced." The program's results "are neither trivial for the students, for the departments, for the institution, nor for higher education."

THE EVALUATORS SAID THE DOCTORAL SCHOLARS PROGRAM'S RETENTION RATE OF MORE THAN 90 PERCENT "MUST BE CONSIDERED EXTRAORDINARY."

THE SREB DOCTORAL SCHOLARS PROGRAM ...

... reduces feelings of isolation and creates a support network.

"The Doctoral Scholars Program on an ongoing basis kept me from feeling like the most isolated graduate student in the country. I cannot tell you the number of times that I called scholars at other schools and Dr. Abraham in Atlanta for advice or just an encouraging word. And I always got the support I needed." **(Alabama scholar)**

"As a female and an African American in the field of physics, I have spent most of my academic career in isolation. The SREB program has put me in contact with other students across the country who truly share my experience. We have formed a study group and e-mail each other to share problems, notes, and resources." **(Mississippi scholar)**

STRONG SUPPORT = STAYING POWER

Strong support = staying power. That fundamental equation explains the success of the Doctoral Scholars Program, says SREB program director Ansley A. Abraham. "Our staff and our partner states understand the challenges our scholars face. We realize what it means to be the only minority doctoral student in a university department or to pursue a field of study in which there are very few people of color to serve as role models."

WITH FINANCIAL SUPPORT FROM PARTICIPATING STATES, THE PROGRAM AWARDS EACH SCHOLAR A STIPEND TO SUPPORT FULL-TIME STUDY FOR THREE YEARS.

"We know that many of our scholars will be 'nontraditional' students — first-generation college graduates, single parents, folks who do not come from backgrounds or university programs where doctoral study is encouraged and even expected," Abraham says. "All of our support strategies grow out of this understanding."

These strategies include regular contact through letters, phone calls, e-mail, a listserv for scholars, and bulletins that keep scholars informed and connected to the program and one another. The program's most powerful tool — the Institute on Teaching and Mentoring — brings together more than 500 scholars and faculty mentors each year for several days of sharing, professional development, and regional and national networking.

With financial support from participating states, the program awards each scholar a stipend to support full-time study for three years.

THE SREB DOCTORAL SCHOLARS PROGRAM ...

... makes doctoral degrees more affordable and allows scholars to complete their degrees more quickly.

"Not everyone can afford a graduate education. That should not be an obstacle, but, unfortunately, it is. Without the financial assistance I received through the Doctoral Scholars Program, I would not have been able to complete my Ph.D." **(Assistant professor, Texas)**

"It took me over six years to complete my master's program because I had to work multiple jobs to supplement my scholarship. With SREB's help, I have had to hold only one job: teaching two classes." **(Oklahoma scholar)**

University-based support begins in the fourth year. The program also offers scholars at the "all-but-dissertation" stage a one-year Dissertation-Year Fellowship. Other funds are earmarked for academic expenses, and SREB has a special fund for research activities, attendance at scholarly meetings, and presentations of academic papers.

The design of the SREB Doctoral Scholars Program "is precisely what is required," the evaluators found, "given the intensity of graduate study, given the sense of isolation that many students experience in their programs and on their campuses, and given limited access to family and peers who understand what they are doing."

THE PROGRAM ALSO OFFERS SCHOLARS AT THE "ALL-BUT-DISSERTATION" STAGE A ONE-YEAR DISSERTATION-YEAR FELLOWSHIP.

One doctoral scholar, who has completed her first year of study, says the program succeeds because "it takes a comprehensive look at the roadblocks to success for minority doctoral students. Support, preparation and encouragement are especially important retention strategies for first-generation doctoral students like myself.

While a lack of financial resources is "definitely a barrier," she says, "it is not the sole barrier. SREB's commitment to addressing ***all*** the barriers is evidenced in their motto: 'More than a check and a handshake.' Their actions support their motto. They not only talk the talk, they walk the walk."

THE SREB DOCTORAL SCHOLARS PROGRAM ...

... makes doctoral degrees more affordable and allows scholars to complete their degrees more quickly.

"The Doctoral Scholars Program made it possible for me to complete the dream I have had all of my life: having the opportunity to teach in higher education. That dream would not have come to fruition without the financial support I received. More important, however, was the constant personal support I felt as a part of the program." **(Maryland scholar)**

"During my last year, I had sole responsibility for teaching two courses while I collected data, wrote my dissertation, and passed by final defense. The support from SREB was crucial." **(Florida scholar)**

WHY THE PROGRAM WORKS

Why is the SREB Doctoral Scholars Program succeeding? The program evaluators drew these conclusions:

- *The annual institute has a powerful effect on scholars and mentors and promotes the development of support networks for faculty-diversity initiatives.*

THE EVALUATORS CONCLUDED THAT "THE INSTITUTE PLAYS AN EXTRAORDINARILY POWERFUL ROLE ..." FOR ALL INVOLVED.

The annual Institute on Teaching and Mentoring strengthens the skills, knowledge and satisfaction levels of doctoral scholars by bringing them together to share personal experiences and learn the "basic mechanics" of conducting research, writing proposals and securing tenure-track faculty positions. College faculty who serve as mentors also are invited to participate. The evaluators concluded that "the institute plays an extraordinarily powerful role ... for the scholars, for mentors who participate, and for developing a network of future faculty."

The evaluators said that the institute offers scholars "a relatively safe environment" to discuss concerns, issues, successes and failures. Scholars have opportunities to share knowledge about academia and scholarship, to participate in "professional socialization" by meeting other scholars and faculty from throughout the country, and to link to a larger community of scholars of color in many academic fields.

THE SREB DOCTORAL SCHOLARS PROGRAM ...

... annual Institute strengthens scholar skills, knowledge and satisfaction.

"Attending the institute last year simply was a wonderful experience for me. I met and made many new friends. These are people who are facing the same challenges that I am facing and people who have overcome those challenges. It was very exciting, and I am already looking forward to this year's institute" **(Delaware scholar)**

"The inclusion of my mentor at the annual conference was extremely helpful in facilitating (our) relationship. As a result, my mentor invited me to be a part of this research team and seeks out ways to include me in research projects." **(North Carolina scholar)**

The institute also has a considerable impact on faculty mentors, the evaluators found. "While the mentors are present at the institute both to share the experience and time with their students, they also are provided opportunities to build their own skills as mentors and their capacity to serve as mentors — often across cultures." On many campuses, "faculty mentors find themselves isolated in their commitment to diversifying graduate study," the evaluators said, and the institute helps them to link up with other faculty engaged in similar efforts and to share experiences and expertise.

THE INSTITUTE ALSO ENABLES FACULTY MENTORS "TO BUILD THEIR OWN SKILLS AS MENTORS."

- *At the program's urging, colleges and universities and academic departments are providing minority doctoral scholars with more and better support.*

The evaluators noted that the philosophy behind the SREB Doctoral Scholars Program always has been "that graduate student success was not going to be realized simply by providing funds." From the beginning, each university and academic department that participated in the program agreed to provide some basic supports, including orientation, a mentor and exposure to teaching. "While these elements may seem very simplistic, they cannot be taken for granted at most graduate institutions," the evaluators said.

THE SREB DOCTORAL SCHOLARS PROGRAM ...

... builds the capacity of the university and its faculty to attract and retain promising minority scholars.

"It was through SREB that I developed a deeper professional relationship with my mentor and adviser that has blossomed. We attended the annual institute, and, based on information received there, we were able to hammer out the type of relationship that we wanted — our boundaries, our expectations and our outcomes." **(Arkansas scholar)**

"My mentor came to the annual conference, and we had a chance to discuss issues that we hadn't discussed over the past year. He actually asked me what my issues were as a minority [and] how he could help and clarified how he saw his role as my mentor. He far exceeded my expectations in terms of his understanding and commitment to my success." **(Georgia scholar)**

WHY THE PROGRAM WORKS (continued)

The evaluators concluded that "most institutions followed through on commitments and that these basic principles of good practice were important to student success." Many faculty members told the researchers that the presence of the Doctoral Scholars Program on their campus had been "critically important to the institution's own diversity efforts" and that the campus saw the program as "an important resource for increasing their own effectiveness."

THE EVALUATORS CONCLUDED THAT "MOST INSTITUTIONS FOLLOWED THROUGH ON COMMITMENTS AND THAT THESE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE WERE IMPORTANT TO STUDENT SUCCESS."

- *The SREB-state partnership has been effective in promoting the Doctoral Scholars Program.*

SREB's work with state boards and policy officials "appears to be a model for developing strategies and commitments to the program at [the state] level," the evaluators said. The evaluators reported that the SREB-state partnership effectively has brought news of the program and its successes to policy-makers and legislators in the SREB states.

- *The program's credibility and effectiveness depend on continuous, reliable funding.*

The SREB Doctoral Scholars Program's commitment to ensuring continuity of funding has minimized scholars' anxieties about financial support and has strengthened their resolve to complete their doctoral degrees, the evaluators reported. "As students have succeeded, stakeholders have become more willing to commit [more] funds."

THE SREB DOCTORAL SCHOLARS PROGRAM ...

... adds status and credibility to the scholars.

"The SREB program has been most instrumental in helping to make important connections to members of the university faculty and staff. Before my SREB connection, I didn't have this sense of empowerment in the university system." **(Mississippi scholar)**

"You cannot put a value on what it means to have your state say, 'You have great potential, and we want to invest in you.' Or what it means when others learn that leaders in your state believe in you. You are recognized and respected." **(West Virginia scholar)**

Though the funding for professional development is modest, it has played a key role in enabling scholars to attend conferences, present papers and build their skills to prepare them for faculty positions, the evaluators found.

- *The program's experience and success make it a strong source of advice and support for similar programs nationwide.*

The Doctoral Scholars Program, with its targeted approach, "has an opportunity to strengthen the goals for diversity," the evaluators said. It "has become a champion itself" for other efforts to diversify faculty.

THE DOCTORAL SCHOLARS PROGRAM, WITH ITS TARGETED APPROACH, "HAS AN OPPORTUNITY TO STRENGTHEN THE GOALS FOR DIVERSITY," THE EVALUATORS SAID.

THE SREB DOCTORAL SCHOLARS PROGRAM ...

... expands the diversity of college faculty.

"I am a Hispanic female. Before I attended the Doctoral Scholars conference, I was set on not taking a tenure-track position. The people I met at the annual conference gave me the confidence, knowledge and power I needed to dive into an academic career. I have just completed my second year as an assistant professor of mathematics, and I am thrilled that I took this position." **(Florida scholar)**

"As a master's-level clinical instructor and an African-American female, I was concerned with the low number of minority Ph.D.s in the university setting. I know how beneficial it was for me as an undergraduate and graduate student to have the benefit of a mentor/professor who 'looked like me.' The SREB program has created within me the strong desire to go back into the educational system and give back to those who come after me." **(North Carolina scholar)**

What needs to happen now

How can the SREB states build on the success of the Doctoral Scholars Program and ensure that it continues to expand the pool of minority faculty members? The program evaluators offered several recommendations:

The Doctoral Scholars Program, "needs to continue and, in light of the changing legal and political climate, needs to be supported," the evaluators concluded.

- *Continue support for the program.*

The Doctoral Scholars Program "needs to continue and, in light of the changing legal and political climate, needs to be supported," the evaluators concluded. The program "is positioned to add significantly to the diversity of the faculty of the future, to effect change in departments and institutions, and to serve as a resource to programs, departments and individuals nationally." Additional state and private funding "could be used to leverage an increase in the numbers of scholars and institutions," the researchers said.

- *Expand the Institute for Teaching and Mentoring.*

The institute "is such a successful model it can serve as a resource to other programs that fund graduate education but do not provide any of the other support" that has become the hallmark of the Doctoral Scholars Program, the evaluators said. They added that the challenge will be to involve participants in other programs "in ways that the scale can be managed."

The SREB Doctoral Scholars Program ...

... helps emerging college faculty develop the teaching skills expected in today's university classrooms.

"Many times the research aspect of our professional careers is highlighted, while very little emphasis is placed on effective teaching. Yet the expectations regarding teaching are high at many of our institutions. Teaching receives strong support from SREB. The program brings us in touch with many top faculty members who share their strategies, techniques and support." **(Arkansas scholar)**

"When I enter a college classroom for the first time as a newly minted assistant professor, I will have a much better idea of what it means to really teach well. And I will have SREB to thank for that." **(Tennessee scholar)**

- *Improve the dissemination of information about the program on college and university campuses.*

Mentors, faculty and administrators who participate in the Doctoral Scholars Program have valuable information and insights to share on their own campuses, the evaluators said. They should be encouraged to spread the word about the Doctoral Scholars Program and its record of success. The evaluators also recommended that certain faculty and administrators be designated to serve as resources to other colleges and "a select group could be available as consultants, as contacts for searches, as potential speakers, etc."

- *Intensify the focus on the transition to faculty positions.*

State and campus leaders should not assume that doctoral scholars who successfully complete the program "will have no trouble finding positions" but must make sure that students "acquire the necessary competency for faculty roles, gain the visibility to be taken seriously on the job market, and are championed by people on and off their campuses."

STATE AND CAMPUS LEADERS MUST MAKE SURE THAT STUDENTS "GAIN THE VISIBILITY TO BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY ON THE JOB MARKET."

THE SREB DOCTORAL SCHOLARS PROGRAM ...

... helps students develop scholarly habits to meet the challenges of graduate study and college teaching.

"The most important features of the Doctoral Scholars Program, to me, are the networking and paper-presentation opportunities at national and international conferences. Without the financial support and encouragement from SREB, I could not have made my first inter-national-conference paper presentation in 1999. This presentation led to my first journal publication." **(Louisiana scholar)**

"I have grown academically, but, most important, I have grown personally. I know more about myself because the sessions and conversations at the annual scholars' conference force me to ask myself the hard questions. The program has really helped me develop the skills necessary to obtain a Ph.D. degree." **(Mississippi scholar)**

SUCCESS "ONE SCHOLAR AT A TIME"

The ultimate goal of the SREB Doctoral Scholars Program is to increase faculty diversity. Evaluators concluded that the program and its participating states have been "extraordinarily successful in keeping that focus."

One new Ph.D., who has assumed a junior faculty position at a large state university, offers the following explanation of the program's effectiveness:

"Higher education leaders have had an easier time identifying serious scholars from among nonminority students, who more often come from scholarly families and recognizable scholarly traditions. SREB has the networks and mechanisms to support a more diverse group of qualified nontraditional scholars for those in higher education who are interested in encouraging serious scholarship, and who stand to benefit from a larger pool of serious scholars from a wide range of cultural and historical backgrounds."

For program director Ansley Abraham, it all comes down to fundamentals. The Doctoral Scholars Program succeeds, he says, because "we take it one scholar at a time. We never lose sight of the fact that each person in our program is a unique individual with his or her own issues, own special circumstances, and own goals and dreams. It's our job to help all of them address all of that, and, if we do it right, they win — and we win, too."

THE SREB DOCTORAL SCHOLARS PROGRAM ...

... provides support for "all-but-dissertation" scholars to complete their degrees.

"I received a dissertation scholarship from SREB, which permitted me to write most of my dissertation without the worry of how to support myself while doing so. It allowed me to focus my attention on my writing." **(Virginia scholar)**

"I was in my final year of graduate school when I received the dissertation fellowship. It not only allowed me to conduct my dissertation research but also enabled me to apply for and interview at 10 internship sites. As a result, I will be completing my internship at Johns Hopkins University Medical School." **(Mississippi scholar)**

Strengthening State and University Policies

In addition to its success with individual students, evaluators say, the SREB Doctoral Scholars Program has resulted in more effective state and university policies. For example, the program has:

- created models of successful approaches to graduate education for underrepresented students from various backgrounds and institutions;
- added to the numbers of African-Americans, Latinos and Native Americans in fields in which they have been underrepresented;
- created opportunities for institutions to succeed with diverse students and thus to develop experience for working with diversity issues on campus;
- developed links with state and regional political leaders and policymakers and increased awareness about the challenges of and opportunities for diversifying faculty; and
- developed many future and current faculty who understand and are engaged by the new and changing demands on higher education — not only in terms of diversity issues but also in terms of teaching, learning and service.